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Sensemaking and Identity Work in a Foreign Host Culture

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Abstract: This paper presents qualitative, exploratory research carried out as a PhD study. It investigated how black educated professionals of African origin experience life and work in a foreign host culture in Finland. The methodology applied in the study was Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). It also applied elements of Interpretive Poetics (IP). The findings show that participants employ sensemaking as a cognitive tool to understand and create meanings of their experiences in the host culture. Their sensemaking relies on and is informed by the values of their native cultures. Whilst navigating their positionality in the host culture they experience identity threat, and as a result, undertake identity work. The study makes a methodological contribution by adding a narrative dimension to IPA (interpretive poetics), thus acknowledging the person's linguistic choices and the meanings they offer. Ontologically, by adopting a critical approach, the study questions the prevailing western ontological perception of the 'other', thus providing a basis for new hybrid epistemologies through reconceptualisation of the Western working cultures and discourses that render some people worthier than others. Finally, the insights into the value of cultural identity provide a contribution to knowledge within organization and diversity management.

Keywords: interpretative phenomenological analysis, interpretive poetics, sensemaking, identity work

1. Introduction

Since the late 1990s Finland has experienced an influx of foreign students and workforce from African countries. The demographic scene of a so-far homogenous, predominantly white Finland changed. Finland became a lot more diversified culturally. Finnish international companies have been experiencing an influx of multicultural employees who identify themselves with two or more cultures and have internalised associated cultural schemas (Brannen & Thomas, 2010).

Deloitte Global Human Capital Trends report of 2019 mentions the need for reinventing business concepts with the focus on organisations whose mission is the need to encompass such matters as diversified work force, flexibility, teamwork, mobility both within organisations and geographical locations. In order to be sustainable and competitive global and international organisations in Finland must develop innovative ways not only to find the right people, develop capabilities, and share expertise, but also encompass diversity. They must find effective ways to recruit the right type of people, as well as find ways to recognise the value of diversity, acknowledge it and be able to retain their employees. This means developing strategies to better tap the skilled intellectual and cultural capital they wish to attract.

According to Padilla and Perez of Stanford University more research needs to be carried out as to the understanding the processes that are at play when it comes to acculturation: immigrants' cognitions of in- and out- group relations, their stigmas. How do these cognitions contribute to the motivation to engage and participate in the new culture? What is the role of stigma, and how individuals cope with it?

2. Literature review

From a cultural perspective Hall (1996, 3) sees the individual sense of self as a collective construct and connects it to one's historical roots. He proposes a definition of cultural identity as "collective or true selves hiding inside the many other, more superficial or artificially imposed "selves" which a people with a shared history and ancestry hold in common". This definition suggests that cultural identities are not unified, but rather fragmented, and multiply constructed depending on discourses and practices. Consequently, they are subjected to constant changes and are contextually dependent. Hall continues by saying that identities are subject to historization, thus debates on identities should be situated within historically specific developments.

Identities invoke their origin in the historical past from which they stem and with which they are still connected. Therefore, as Hall further implies, identities are about using the resources of history, as well as language, to develop, evolve and become rather than simply be.

Hall (1996) claims that identities are not so much about who we are, or where we come from, but more about how we have been represented and how that bears on how we might represent ourselves. Hall (1996) appropriated the term *identity* in the following way: identity refers to a meeting point, or the point of suture between the discourses and practices, which in turn produce subjectivities that can be spoken. What this means is that identities are points of contemporary attachment to the subject positions which discursive practices construct for people. Identities are positioning that people must take whilst knowing that these positions are representations. According to Hall representations are always constructed from the place of the *other* and “are therefore constituted within, not outside representation” (Hall, 1996, 4).

Culture can be understood in terms of “a dialectic entanglement of both indigenous “roots” and traveling/migratory “routes”. Clifford (2001, 477). People’s routes, or itineraries shape the ways in which people navigate oppressive socio-political structures. Since everyday performances of identities emerge from tight articulations of ideologies, those same performances provide opportunities for pushing back those articulations to create counterhegemonic leverage. Performance seen by Conquerood (1998/2013, 58) is dynamic, “an action that incessantly insinuates, interrupts, interrogates, and antagonizes powerful master discourses”, and which Bhabha sees as “continuous, performative space” (1984, 58).

From a critical perspective, Alvesson and Willmott (2002) see identity as an important yet still unexplored dimension of organisational control. They link the concept of identity, for example, to ethnicity, entrepreneurship, as well as motivation and meaning making (Alvesson et al., 2008). They further explore identity as “encountered by individuals, understood as a social being embedded in organisational contexts” (Alvesson et al., 2008, 6). For them, identity refers to subjective meanings and experience, as well as visions of the self. Identity is also temporary, context-sensitive and fragmented.” It is a matter of becoming as well of being”.

2.1 Concepts of identity

2.1.1 Race and colour identity

Previous studies of black men have primarily focused on the young, unemployed and poorly educated (Anderson, 1999; Jones, 2010; MacLeod, 2009; Wilson, 2010; Young, 1999, 2014) looked at violence in urban areas, employment in urban areas, urban poverty, and employment problems respectively. Wiebold and Spiller (2016) researched the impact of black identity negotiations on the level of professional success among black men living in mainstream American society and looked at the ways in which they attained success at work.

From a cultural perspective studies on race and identity have been carried out by Appiah (1994), Hill (1996), Sellers and Shelton (2003) who connected racial identity to racial discrimination among African Americans. Charles (2003) connects black identity to self-hatred. White and Burke (1987) examined a structural symbolic interactionist approach to the process of ethnic identity formation among black and white college students. Sen (2007) discussed the concept of whiteness as a location in social hierarchy. The above studies looked onto various aspects of black identity development, but none of them considered the impact of own sensemaking on identity developments.

2.2 Key theories

Identity theories aim to answer existential questions such as “Who am I?” and “How should I act?” (Alvesson et al, 2008). Within social psychology two major theories, Social Identity Theory (SIT), introduced in the 1970s by Tajfel and Turner (1985), and Identity Theory (IT) propose a view of the self as well as identity. Although both theories are based on different aspects of identity, when applied together, they provide a deeper and wider insight and understanding.

2.2.1 The concept of identity in both theories

The concept of identity is divided into *self-categorisation* in Social Identity Theory (SIT) (Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, and Wetherell 1987), and *identification* in Identity Theory (IT) (McCall and Simmons, 1978). *Self-categorization* in SIT and *identification* in IT are processes through which the self is reflexive and can take itself as an object and can categorise, classify and name itself (McCall and Simmons 1987). Identity construction

happens through these processes, where individuals draw on social identities and discourses available to them in their social environment.

In view of my research questions that delve into how individuals experience life in a foreign host culture, I find the premises of both theories relevant. As the theories focus on people both as individuals and social beings the concepts of identification and categorization shed light on understanding how the self is influenced by belonging to various groups, and by various discourses.

Based on the above-mentioned theories, there are two important processes that happen when social identity is formed: self-categorization and social comparison. These processes produce different consequences (Hogg and Abrams, 1988). The consequence of self-categorization is an accentuation of the perceived similarities between the self and the other in-group members. The consequence of social comparison is the selective application of the accentuation effect in those dimensions that enhance the self. Specifically, one's self-esteem is enhanced by evaluating the in-group and the out-group on dimensions that lead the in-group to be judged positively and the out-group to be judged negatively. As Hogg and Abrams (1988) point out, the social categories in which individuals place themselves are parts of a structured society and exist only in relation to other contrasting categories. Each category has more prestige, power, and status. These social categories precede the individuals who are born into these categories, pre-structured by societies. People derive their identities from the social categories to which they belong.

As far as identification is concerned, in case of the participants of my study I see identification as problematic. There is a tension between how they might want to identify themselves, how they think they are perceived and identified by others, and how they might be judged as a result. Another problematic issue I see here is categorisation and group belonging: if an individual negotiates the tensions mentioned above, he/she might experience difficulties with self-categorisation, and this in turn, might lead to diminished self-esteem.

According to IT, self-categorisation is relevant to identity formation. Categorization here depends on a named and classified world (Stryker, 1989). Roles are termed here as relatively stable, morphological components of social structure, various symbols that are used to designate positions. This categorisation is the core of identity. The meanings and expectations associated with the roles are incorporated into the self. These meanings and expectations form a set of standards that guide behaviour (Burke, 1991; Burke and Reitzes, 1981). For example, if skin colour is perceived as a symbol then that might designate specific position that renders that individual inferior. If that position is, in turn incorporated to the self, it can have detrimental effects on that person's wellbeing.

Based on the above the following two processes will be a natural consequence: activation of specific identity, where one or more types will be salient. Depending on which identity will be activated, cognitive and sensemaking processes will take place: an individual will depersonalise or self-verify him/herself. Consequently, motivational processes may follow: an individual's self-esteem and self-efficacy may be either enhanced or diminished.

3. Methodology

I adopted IPA as its core aim and commitment are to explore how people make sense of the way they experience their personal and social world, and its focus is on the study of the meanings particular experiences or events bring to individuals (Smith & Osborn, 2007; Tomkins, 2017). Its objective is to understand lived experiences and explore how individuals make sense of their personal and social worlds; the meanings participants attach to experiences are considered the 'main currency' of IPA research (Smith & Osborn, 2003). Through the two complimentary commitments of IPA – 'giving voice' and 'making sense', I sought to attain an 'insider perspective' of lived experiences of the participants. IPA's philosophical roots in the fundamentals of phenomenology, hermeneutics and idiography (Smith et al. (2012), as well as its reflexive component suited well my ontological approach.

In my analysis I considered wider contexts in which the narratives were produced. Therefore Schleiermacher's (1998, in Smith et al. 2012) approach, which provides a holistic view of interpretative process, was well suited. This approach allowed me to investigate the grammatical level, hence incorporation of elements of NA: interpretative poetics (Rogers, 1999). This holistic approach also created possibilities of "an understanding of

the utterer better than he understands himself" (Schleiermacher, 1998, 266). As both IPA and NA share strong intellectual commitments, they complemented each other and rendered a deeper level of analysis.

IPA acknowledges my participation as a researcher, it requires the application of a double hermeneutic perspective. It also calls for small groups of participants (Larkin et al, 2018) with a uniform set of demographic characteristics. I selected a purposive group of ten participants: five males and five females. The participants had been living in Finland for at least 15 years and had had at least 10 years of work experience.

4. Findings and discussion

Data analysis showed that the process of sensemaking was a cognitive tool applied by the participants. The thematic analysis of the narratives as well as the interpretive poetics analysis showed that the sensemaking process also became a part of the identity construction of the participants.

In the following part I make a connection between the process of sensemaking and identity construction by showing how absorbing cultural values of the home cultures shaped the cultural identities of the participants. I further show how the values of the home cultures became salient and influential in the sensemaking of experiences in the host culture.

4.1 Themes and values

The themes identified by the females differed from those of the males. The main differences were in the understanding of the concepts of family. Whereas female participants focused on close relationships with family members, especially with the parents, the males focused on the parental influence in terms of motivating them to get an education. In the host culture the male participants did not stress the importance of faith and spirituality, whereas females saw it is a crucial part of their life and identity. In the host culture both female and males identified injustice and discrimination, but for the males it resulted in feelings of alienation and a sense of dislocated self, and for the females it resulted in a reinforced sense of self and enhanced ambition and belief in own potential. For the females, faith and spirituality seemed to play an instrumental role in the process. Another theme, common for both groups were importance of kinship and cultural belonging.

4.1.1 Importance of kinship and cultural belonging

The importance of belonging and kinship had its roots in African culture. These values shaped the participants as children and informed the way they understood and made sense of their experiences. The importance of kinship and belonging present in the narratives of the host culture illustrated deeply embedded values of sharing and belonging that the participants grew into in their childhood.

This came to a stark clash with the values of the host culture in Finland. All participants expressed a sense of alienation and a feeling of not belonging. Drawing on both Social Identity Theory (SIT) (Turner, Hogg, Oakes, et al., 1987) and Identity Theory (IT) (McCall and Simmons, 1978) that divide the concept of identity into *self-categorisation*, and *identification*, as well as Alvesson et al. (2008) claim that identity theories aim to answer existential questions "who am I?" and "how should I act?" I see the understanding of self (who I am) as connected to belonging (with whom I am).

Drawing on the cultural values inherent to the African culture, for the participants in my study their sense of self and understanding of who they were was very much tied to their belonging to a group: a family, a tribe, a village, etc. That belonging was also a source of tangible and intangible support that enhanced their sense of self and their wellbeing.

Following Brown's (2015) conceptualization of sense of self (2015) and connecting it to Alvesson's questions of identity and behavior, I concluded that in case of the narratives mentioned above answering the question "who am I?" did not pose a problem. However, resolving the question "how should I act?" was problematic. The participants tried to comply with the expectations Finnish working environment demanded: having an education and being willing to work. Yet, as it turned out this did not guarantee the expected outcomes, thus impacting their sense of well-being in a negative way.

4.1.2 Parental push towards studying and getting an education

The influence of parents, and their mentoring roles was particularly strongly emphasized in the narratives of the male participants. Being educated was seen, by their parents and grandparents, as having social status, a path to getting a profession, and a way to securing a secure financial situation. Studying was also seen as a source of gaining self-confidence, and achieving good results was a source of self-esteem, developing diligence, hard work and perseverance.

The analysis showed that for the participants education had another intangible value that meant a lot more: it was a frame of mind and an understanding that being educated can offer what the previous generations did not have: financial stability and access to something that previously was only accessible for people of higher social position, the white people.

4.1.3 Close parent-child relationships, female participants

The third theme of close parent-child relationships was mostly highlighted in the narratives of the females the nurturing influence of both parents played pivotal, albeit different roles in identity construction of the females. Close relationships with the mothers developed and maintained strong black woman identity, whereas close relationships with the fathers developed strong entrepreneurial woman identity. The understanding of these identities informed the sensemaking of the experiences in the host culture in Finland and became beneficial and supportive in the host culture in Finland.

4.1.4 Religion, spirituality and faith

Female participants grew up as Christians, some, incorporated indigenous native beliefs into her Christian faith. In all cases though, spirituality and religion became sources of strength and support when dealing with challenges in the Finnish culture. They offered support and a meaningful purpose. They also became a part of their cultural identity.

4.1.5 Interpretive poetics: story threads, divided I, and positioning

The story threads identified in the narratives added a deeper layer to the analysis. They uncovered a seemingly invisible thread that, whilst stripped of the content (the plot and the events) shed light on what really was at play in the narratives.

The story threads that run throughout female narratives related to sadness, taking on roles of responsibility, close relationships, missing connections, flexibility, acceptance and adjustment, belonging.

In the way all female participants divided their 'I' revealed tensions of being at odds with who they really were and who they wanted to be. All females also positioned themselves at a distance to difficult situations (racial abuse) at times to become observers (not participants), and at times to counsel themselves.

Whilst meandering between the real and the ideal selves, the ideal remained rooted in the values of the home cultures. The positive experiences of the past become sources of reflection and sensemaking; they referred to people and places. The connections with closest family, sometimes severed, with the people who belonged to the same tribe, social group, community, brought back positive memories and revived a sense of belonging.

In the host culture the participants strategically positioned themselves in their narratives at times to distance themselves from situations and locations where they did not want to be, at times to reassure themselves of the possibilities and the freedom and power they had in Finland. They addressed themselves at times as individuals, at times as parts of a collective, which they expressed by using singular *you* or plural *they*.

There was a connection between the ability to accept and adjust to situations beyond their control and being at odds with who they wanted to be, and who they really were. By attributing who they were to their home culture and the native spirituality that they learned about and practiced in their homes they illustrated their connection with and attachment to their native home culture. By rationalizing their experiences, attributing positive and constructive value to them they were able to acknowledge the value of challenging experiences and transform them into positive discoveries. Living and working in the host culture in Finland necessitated sensemaking that allowed some reconciliation of both worlds.

The story threads that run through the narratives of the male participants related to falling and rising, giving, and taking, holding on to the native culture, duality of cultural identity, importance of fairness. The polarity of the threads within the narratives was striking and it suggested entanglement of tensions the male participants negotiated.

Falling and rising referred to feeling crushed by experiencing difficult situations but persevering and not giving up. Giving and taking referred to accepting situations, at times at the cost of compromising own cultural values. The negotiations between living according to own cultural values and attempting to fit into the host culture were continuous and often led to identity ambiguity. The need to be treated fairly became so strong that it overshadowed all sensemaking and created threats to own cultural identity. The values learned in the native home cultures, such as perseverance and diligence proved helpful in finding meaningful understandings.

All male participants divided "I" suggested tensions between who they felt they were (black African men) and who they were in Finland. On the one hand, hardworking, flexible, creative, and not afraid to take risks, and on the other, men whose talents were not acknowledged, their presence not accepted, thus preventing them from developing their professional trajectories. Through their divided "I" the participants referred to themselves as singular *I* or singular *You* when talking about the difficulties, and as plural *We* when describing positive memories of their life in the home culture.

The sensemaking of the male participants showed continuous oscillating between the values of their native culture and the host culture in Finland, balancing between two different cultural belongings. What appeared as seeming flexibility, was in fact tension and entanglement of the categorisations of one's belonging and being at odds with trying to adjust behaviour and values in Finland in order to fit in. Unlike the female participants the males' sensemaking did not provide support and comfort. To the contrary, it was a source of tensions, thus creating an unsettling sense of ambiguity and ambivalence.

4.2 Identity in the host culture

Revoking the concept of culture as *routes* and *roots* (Clifford, 1994), I concluded that people's trajectories were shaped by the ways in which people navigate oppressive socio-political structures. Since everyday performances of identities emerge from tight articulations of ideologies, those same performances provide opportunities for pushing back those articulations to create counterhegemonic leverage. Performance seen by Conquerood (1998/2013, 58) is dynamic, "an action that incessantly insinuates, interrupts, interrogates, and antagonizes powerful master discourses", and which Bhabha sees as "continuous, performative space" (1984, 58). Representation and performativity go hand in hand; performing one's (discursively and ideologically imposed) self and one's geographical points of origin implies a determinist notion of who one is and who one is supposed to be. It is the place of birth and the social expectations that are the determining factors. It does not however consider situations where one's freedom to perform is limited, or even predetermined. In case of the participants in my study, with black skin the performative aspect of their cultural identity was partly predetermined, thus limiting their performative freedom.

Further, the entanglement between the migratory routes and indigenous roots and the tension they create are revealed in the narratives of the participants when they describe their location in the foreign host culture where they live and work. The way they perform who they are is context dependent and greatly influenced by it. The relationship and connection between one's cultural identity to their past are essential, as it influences the way the participants understand their experiences.

Otherness, reflexively organised narrative and meaning - making are all connected to each other and resonant in my study. The participants made meaning of their experiences and organized it in reflexive narratives or stories they shared with me in their narratives. By doing this they revealed their understanding and sensemaking of not only what happens, but also of who they were in relation to the other and otherness. By otherness I mean not only the other individuals, but the discourses, perceptions, expectations, as well as images of themselves.

4.2.1 Identity threats

The concept of prototypicality of the threatened identity was of relevance to my study. Turner (1982) claims that people's social identities can be cognitively represented in terms of prototypes. What happens here is the following: people construct social identities in the moment to maximize meaning by identifying category

boundaries that highlight key similarities and differences. When an identity is threatened, an individual draws boundary between ingroup and outgroup members around the most salient properties of the prototype for that identity. And when an individual interacts with someone who is highly prototypical of a threatened identity the interaction makes that identity particularly salient and heighten the psychological discomfort.

The male participants in my study demonstrated identity threats when they experienced a sense of alienation in the host culture. They gave meanings to situations based on their subjective interpretations. This is what Elsbah (2003) describes as identity threat sensitivity. People interpret the same event in different ways. People with high identity threat sensitivity will see an event as threatening, but people with low identity threat sensitivity will see it as benign. The level of identity threat sensitivity is a function of high identification (Sluss & Ashforth, 2007), chronic self-identity (Johnson & Young, 2010) and low social identity complexity (Roccas & Brewer, 2002).

I see the concepts of identification, performativity and representation as interconnected. Identification refers to the extent to which one places high importance on an affective attachment to a specific identity regarding one's own self-concept. For example, in my study the females identified themselves as African women (identity), and this was central to their self-concepts, or self-defining (high self-identification). This identification (as strong archetypal African woman) served a purpose of negotiating and alleviating the tensions between identification and performativity. They embraced their colour identity as central and crucial to their self-concept, and that helped alleviate potential tensions in understanding events or situations that could be interpreted as an identity threat (Sluss & Ashforth, 2007). This influenced the way they represented themselves.

4.2.2 Identity work

The males, on the other hand, in order to mitigate their threatened identities undertook identity work (Kreiner, Hollensbe & Sheep, 2006) in several ways. They identified and refuted information from the past which compensated for the bad feedback received. They also showed what Kreiner, Hollensbe & Sheep (2006) coined as spinning or exiting the identity, through which they find nuanced meanings to their identity to seek for compensation. For example, spinning the identity was done by all participants in the situations where they drew on their cultural native values by means of comparing them to the ones of the host culture. By doing this they were able to find positive self-validation. They were also able, albeit to some extent, to exit their identities in situations where they felt they were not accepted. They were not able to exit and enter alternative identities, though. They attempted to fit in and adopt Finnish behavioural values, but that did not mean entering Finnish identity. Instead they enacted the desired ways of behavior.

In a workplace, identity is crucial in navigating social interaction. A lot of organisational life and interactions take place in dyadic interactions with others. "Through interacting with others, we create shared meaning, which both informs and constraints identity" (Weick et al., 2005, p. no?) as well as face-to-face interactions within a workplace which "allows for the positive enactment of valued identities" (Thatcher & Zhu, 2006). In dyadic interactions, two different features of identity are relevant: 1) different self-concepts become activated at different times and in different contexts, and 2) dyadic interactions offer individuals opportunities to meet their fundamental needs for self-verification. Accordingly, individuals use identity cues to adopt interaction strategies. These strategies are likely to confirm their existing self-views to interaction partners. Therefore, I conclude that workplace interactions may attenuate or exacerbate the psychological discomfort caused by lingering identity threats. The male participants expressed most tensions and necessity for creating various interaction strategies in order to minimize psychological discomfort.

The conceptualisation offered by Thatcher & Zhu (2006) the activation of different identities in different times and contexts, as well as the fulfilment of the need for self-verification hold true, but only to limited extent. Firstly, individuals with black skin have very limited possibility to activate or deactivate their identities. Secondly, the dyadic interactions with co-workers in the Finnish work environment did not create opportunities to meet their fundamental needs for self-verification; they exacerbated the psychological discomfort causing long lasting identity threats, or what Gioia et al (2013) describe as enduring identity proposition.

For Gioia the criteria of distinctiveness and continuity were drawn from conceptions of individual identity. The aspect of continuity was connected to Erikson's (1968, 22) work on identity crisis. Erikson's ego-identity is defined as "an awareness of the fact that there is a self-sameness and continuity to the ego's synthesizing

methods and a continuity of one's meaning of others". In times of constant or frequent change, the stability of identity serves as a psychological anchor. A change within an organization can cause distress, anxiety, discomfort and lowering or loss of self-esteem. In case of the participants of my study the changes occurred not only within their working environment, but also in their personal lives. Relocating from a home to a host culture was one of the changes. Following Erikson (1968) having the awareness of one's constant and unchanging sense of self is crucial for one's psychological well-being I conclude that for individuals who lose that awareness the level of psychological discomfort and distress can be very high. This can result in lowering self-esteem and motivation.

5. Conclusion

My study investigated experiences of black African professionals in a foreign host culture, and it was further interested in the way the values of the cultural identity of the participants influence the way they understand their experiences.

The findings showed that participants employed sensemaking as a cognitive tool to understand and create meanings of their experiences. Their sensemaking relied on and was informed by the values of their native cultures of their respective countries. Whilst navigating their positionalities in the host culture they made sense of experiences and situations, a process that resulted in a sense of alienation and not belonging. Consequently, the participants' sense of self was threatened. The identity work they undertook, through sensemaking, took them back to their cultural roots, rendering a possibility to create their cultural routes in the host culture.

My study makes a methodological contribution by adding a narrative dimension to IPA, thus acknowledging the person's linguistic choices and the meanings they offer. Ontologically, by adopting a critical approach, my study questions the prevailing western ontological perception of the 'other', thus providing a basis for new hybrid epistemologies through reconceptualisation of the Western working cultures and discourses that render some people worthier than others. Finally, the insights into the value of cultural identity contribute to knowledge within organisation and diversity management. .

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